How to manage and protect
your institution's online image

By KIM FERNANDEZ

Operation Reputation

Not too terribly long ago, high school students, their parents, and even college alumni developed their ideas about specific schools through mainstream news reports, printed brochures, local visits by institution representatives, and spoken gossip. Reputation management wasn't glamorous, but it was easy to control. Create a gorgeous booklet; woo high school counselors; tout winning sports teams and student and professor accomplishments to local media; send alumni magazines; and try to divert spoken rumors when they cropped up, which wasn't very often.

Even when the Internet became the go-to source for information, colleges and universities continued to control communications online. Schools created Web sites on which they posted press releases and general information, along with beautiful photos of the campus and students, fun facts, and directories.

In the past few years, however, the online world has changed. It seems everyone is suddenly on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, and anyone who can string words together—and a few who can't—seem to have glommed onto blogs, spouting opinions into the cyberworld with abandon.

Who reads those things, right?

As it turns out, lots of people. Facebook claims 200 million worldwide users, MySpace has 100 million, and Twitter estimates 4.6 million people are using its site—and those numbers
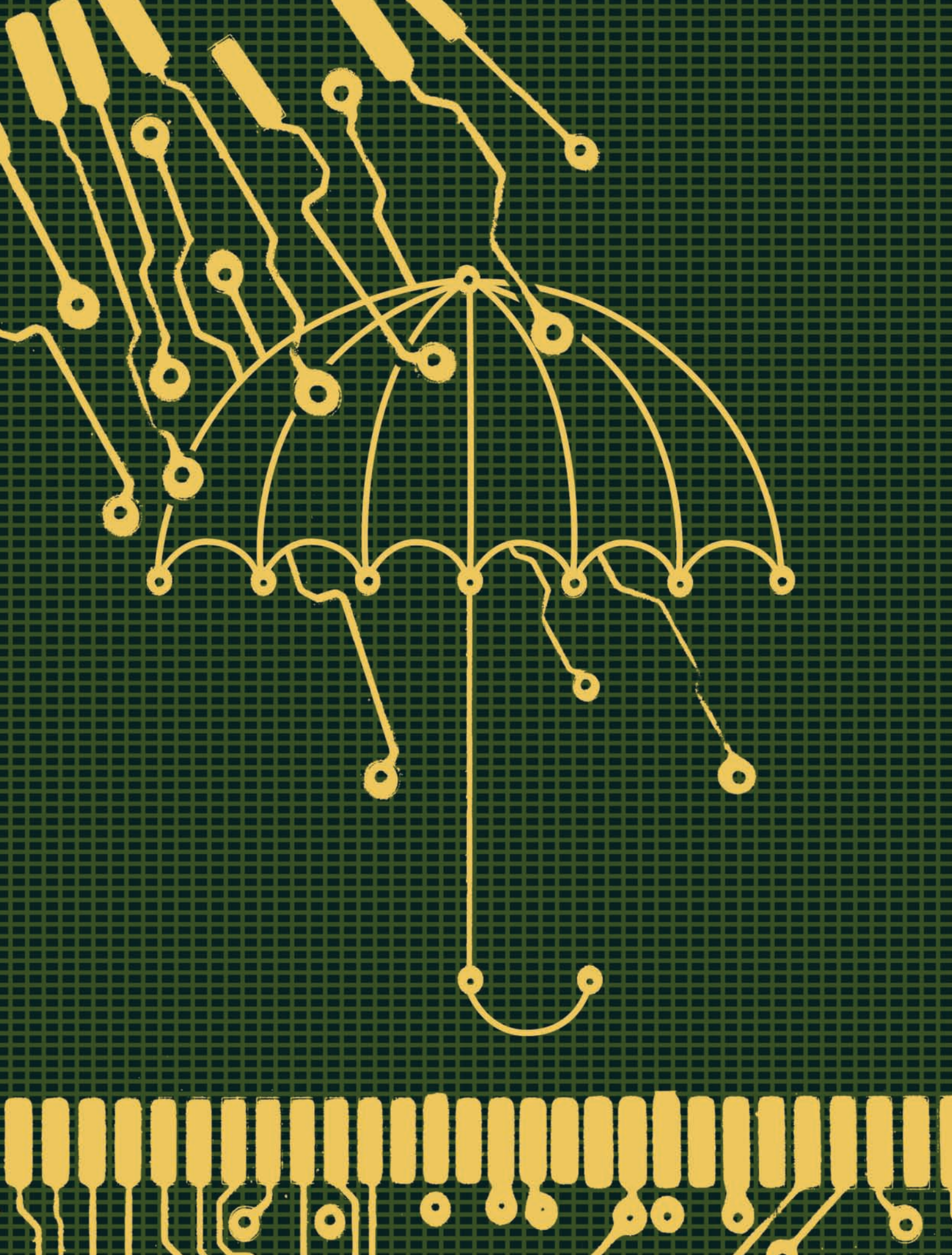
are growing every day. Prospective students, parents, and alumni not only read what's being written about colleges and universities, but they also often form opinions solely based on what they find in a Google search, even when that information isn't completely steeped in fact.

"There are so many touchpoints with prospective students especially," says Kim Toomey, an account executive at Anvil Media, a social media marketing company in Oregon.

"[Students are] getting information from their high schools, from other colleges, college fairs, direct mail, and Web sites. There's so much out there that it's hard to track what the determining factor is in the opinions they form and the choices they make," she says.

Toomey knows through her surveys that students are spending more and more time researching schools online before they schedule campus visits or consider applying.

Enter online reputation management. Through companies like Anvil Media or on their own with dedicated staff, more and more institutions are monitoring what's being written about them online. Institutions have two routes to bolstering their online reputations: a proactive one

in which advancement professionals post press releases, blogs, and Facebook entries of their own; and a reactive one in which school officials respond to other people's posts and try to correct misconceptions.

It sounds simple, but many communications and marketing offices are finding that managing an online reputation can be a rocky trail to navigate.

KID GLOVES

This past spring, a graduate student at Ohio State University posted on the school's Facebook page, questioning President E. Gordon Gee's involvement with an energy company that had been criticized by environmentalists. University staff deleted the post and blocked all comments to the page. Several days later, officials reversed the decision and reopened the page to comments.

Ted Hattemer, director of new media at the university, says the policy reversal boiled down to a free-speech issue. "What we found is that by participating in that space, we've basically created Ohio State property," he says. "All Ohio State property has the requirement of meeting a basic freedom of speech. We quickly reversed the decision [to remove the post]

once we figured that out, thanks to good advice from our legal affairs department. We're back in business."

The incident demonstrates a big issue that institutional leaders face when they start monitoring their online reputations: How should they respond when something less than flattering is posted on the Internet for the whole world to see?

Those who've been there say that schools need to establish policies about this kind of situation and decide on a strategy well before any negative posts crop up. Are institutions going to respond to potentially harmful comments, try to have them removed, or ignore them? The answer to that question can vary greatly based on a variety of factors.

Toomey advises clients to assign someone from the university to reply to bloggers and others who post negative comments and information about the institution online. "We make sure we have the right person from the university address those comments, especially if they're untrue," she says. "Even if something is true, we make sure the school is aware of it and addresses it appropriately. It's like any good PR—you want to take a stand and own up to your mistakes."

in short

MEDIA IN TRANSITION. A recent survey by the Association of National Advertisers and *BtoB* magazine and in partnership with marketing services firm 'mktg' found that 66 percent of marketers used social media in 2009, up from 20 percent in 2007. Respondents cited Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn as the sites they use the most. How are these marketing mavens paying for this new work? Fifty-five percent of them shifted funds from their traditional media budget, and 48 percent funded the cost from other marketing communication budgets; 26 percent created an additional budget. For more information on the survey, go to *www.ana.net/news/content/1824*.

EXPAND THE SCOPE. Communications and marketing professionals aren't the only people on campus struggling to figure out how social media can help them do their jobs. Professors and instructors are also trying to keep up with new technology in their work. The blog Learning in the Future (*www2.tlc.unlv.edu/3l0gz/michael*) discusses how educators can bring new media, such as YouTube, podcasts, and Second Life, into the college classroom. For some perspective on how marketers outside the ivory tower are coping with this brave new world, check out Web strategist Jeremiah Owyang's blog (*www.web-strategist.com/blog*). He regularly discusses Web tools that can help companies connect with customers.

> "We never respond to anything without identifying ourselves. That's rule No. 1. If you're hiding in the site, you lose the credibility of your audience."

Others take a less direct approach to online negativity. Tracy Stewart, vice president for information technology at Regent University in Virginia, says Regent's policy is to not respond to negative posts online.

"A lot of times, I want to get on there and tell people they don't know what they're talking about," she says with a laugh. "But we try to get our own conversations going, and we don't respond to the negative things out there."

About a year ago, Regent sent an e-mail to all students and faculty asking if anyone was interested in blogging about the school. To date, about 75 people have begun posting about their Regent experiences, both to the university's site and to their own sites.

"These students are of all ages," says Stewart. "Some are on campus, some are online, they're all different majors. We have a guy in Iraq who's taking online classes, and we have a stay-at-home mom. We want potential students to be able to connect with someone who's in the same life situation they are." The result, she says, is that negative or untrue postings about the university are pretty quickly countered by the school's bloggers, allowing Regent staff to officially stay out of things.

Other institutions want staff involved in countering any misperceptions or negative information—with some ground rules in place. Philly Mantella, senior vice president of enrollment management and student affairs at Northeastern University in Massachusetts, says, "We never respond to anything without identifying ourselves. That's rule No. 1. If you're hiding in the site, you lose the credibility of your audience. If you choose to respond in a blog or in a conversation, you need to identify yourself. You also need to decide if this is the best place for you to respond."

Mantella says Northeastern has encountered a few cases in which staff needed to be proactive and address an issue before a negative posting could become a problem. "Let's say the issue is clarification of a letter … [that] was misunderstood. It wasn't well-drafted or whatever. We go right out to the audience and say, 'We've received a few questions and we'd like to clarify what was said.' We get that out into the conversation and into our social media space."

However, Northeastern also has experienced situations in which silence really is golden. "You've got to accept that you're not going to control all of it," she says. "There's going to be an awful lot that you're going to choose not to respond to. And then there will be times when you want to go out to your audience and make that clarification and try to stop any further conversations that way if you can."

The situation itself, she says, largely dictates whether the school will directly reply to something on the Internet.

"We think of it as a reaction or a response to protecting ourselves in the external world," she explains. "We generally make a decision whether or not to handle it as a communications issue. If someone posts something about a faculty member's inappropriate behavior, that's not a communications issue."

In cases where a response is warranted, she says, speed is of the essence. "You've got to make that decision very close to the original posting," she explains. "You realize that if you're doing this based on a monthly report, things are going to be over and done with by the time you learn about it."

MAKE TIME TO GO ONLINE

That's why regular monitoring of online postings is critical. Rebecca Butler, senior director of marketing at Sinclair Community College in Ohio, works with a strategic communications council, which

STAY IN THE KNOW. Before you start using new social media tools such as Twitter, it's a good idea to familiarize yourself with the ways of that world. Check out "Twitter Etiquette: Five Dos and Don'ts" on *Computerworld*'s Web site for helpful hints on proper behavior in the Twittersphere (*www.computerworld. com/s/article/9127747*). But, remember, it's not just about what you write; you need to be aware of what's being posted and tweeted about your institution. A helpful post on the SitePoint Web site (*www.sitepoint.com/blogs/2009/05/21/tools-manage-online-reputation*) links to 16 free tools to help you manage your institution's online reputation.

BRAVE NEW SKILL SET. Although the *New York Times* hired its first social media editor in May, business news channel CNBC reports (*www.cnbc.com/id/31893821*) that most companies taking advantage of social media sites are not creating new positions for this work and are giving the additional posting, tracking, and tweeting work to the public relations staff. But that's not to say that the social media explosion isn't changing today's job market. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reports that social media skills are becoming crucial for job hunters, even for those who are not seeking marketing or PR jobs (*www.ajc.com/business/social-media-skills-become-crucial-for-job-hunters-102247.html*).

YOUR OWN POLICE FORCE

Many communications and marketing professionals who are managing their institutions' online reputations say they started out by using a paid service to scout online sites but found they could set up alerts and perform brief daily scans themselves without a huge time commitment.

The first step, they advise, is to set up Google Alerts, a free service that sends alerts on specific topics via a daily e-mail.

Philly Mantella, Northeastern University's senior vice president of enrollment management and student affairs, says it's important to also frequent sites that are popular with prospective students and their parents. Here is a sampling of the sites she regularly monitors:

SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES

Facebook
www.facebook.com

MySpace
www.myspace.com

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Accepted Admissions Almanac
blog.accepted.com

AdmissionsAdvice.com
collegehunt.blogspot.com

CollegeBoard.com
www.collegeboard.com

College Confidential
talk.collegeconfidential.com

theU.com
www.theu.com

COLLEGE AND PROFESSOR REVIEWS

AutoAdmit
www.xoxohth.com

College OTR
www.collegeotr.com

Outside.in
outside.in

Rate My Professors
www.ratemyprofessors.com

StudentsReview
www.studentsreview.com

Unigo
www.unigo.com

PROFESSIONAL WEB SITES

CollegeRecruiter.com
www.collegerecruiter.com/weblog

Inside Higher Ed
www.insidehighered.com

SEARCH SITES RELATED TO BLOGS, NEWS, AND ONLINE FORUMS

Google Blog Search
blogsearch.google.com

Google Groups
Groups.Google.com

Google News
news.google.com

LiveJournal
www.livejournal.com/community

Yahoo! Answers
answers.yahoo.com

includes the media relations director, chief of staff in the president's office, manager of the Web site, and others responsible for getting the college's messages out.

"We come together to manage our messages under all platforms," she says. Several staff members monitor what's written about the university in both print and online forums, using clip services and search engines to keep on top of what's out there, both officially and from John Q. Public.

Starting a monitoring process can be daunting, Butler says, but it's necessary, especially if a college is using online social networking. "If you're really going to embrace Web 2.0, you have to embrace all of it," she says. "You can't stick your big toe in the water and then shy away from the rest."

Anvil's Toomey says that when her company starts working with a university, she first conducts an online audit by searching news sites, blogs, and social networking portals (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter) and by running general search-engine queries about the university and key personnel.

Many of those on the do-it-yourself plan have set up a Google alert (*www.google.com/alerts*) for their institution's name. Google Alerts searches news sites, blogs, and social networking sites and sends a daily e-mail with links to articles and pieces that mention the school.

Mantella says she has a "fairly long list" of sites that she and her staff monitor. (See sidebar to the left.) "There are a number of sites that are active from an enrollment perspective, and those are different than those concerning alumni."

Stewart says that Regent signed up for a paid Internet monitoring service last year but dropped it after three months when they found it wasn't cost-effective. These monitoring services can cost $1,000 or more per month. In addition, they can yield information that isn't relevant. "A lot of the conversations weren't academic, and that's what we're looking for," she says.

She also tried to create positive online buzz for the university by starting Regent's official Facebook page, posting more events on the Web site, and launching a Twitter account. "We realized we weren't out there ourselves, participating," she says.

PROACTIVE STEPS

Facebook has become a go-to site for colleges and universities. Many have launched their own pages and invite students and

alumni to become "fans" and access a "wall" of conversations and information, along with photos and regular status updates. Because anyone can launch a page on Facebook or MySpace (which has a much younger audience than Facebook), it can be difficult to reign in members of the university community who choose to post unflattering or untrue items about a school.

"We established administrator privileges so that the communications department posts to most of our page," says Ohio State's Hattemer. Creating these privacy settings prevents others from posting on the wall.

Hattemer says Ohio State was careful to post its Web manager's e-mail address on its page, hoping that people who had a gripe or comment might get in touch and open up a direct line of communication.

Sinclair's Butler says that posting regularly to the college's Facebook page allows her and her colleagues to steer conversations, boosting positive comments and fending off negative and inaccurate remarks before they happen.

"Our communications council works to get out ahead of an issue," she says. "At least if we put it on our page and address it, we might have the ability to guide how the comments are going or guide the discussion."

Mantella says her team quickly discovered that just keeping track of conversations was easier than gauging their overall importance to the institution's online reputation. "As you study this, you learn that you really have to be careful about using it as a research tool," she says. "If someone starts a negative conversation, those who chime in tend to be negative. You have to look at the overall direction, the tonality, the volume, and the significance—is this really a brand or a reputation issue?"

There are times when it's appropriate to ask a site owner to take down incorrect information. Stewart says she learned that quickly, when in her regular scan of Web sites, she found that someone had created a MySpace account in the name of Regent's president and had posted a picture of him. "It wasn't a very nice page, either," she says. "I contacted the company on behalf of the university and let them know that was not our president's page. They removed it. I've had to do that nine times now."

She also contacted a Web site when someone posted a petition there to have a dean of the school removed. "They were saying things about the dean that had no basis [in fact]," she says. "They did remove some of the content."

Those situations aside, she tries not to respond to negative comments. "A lot of the conversations out there are political," she says. "If someone said something about our academics, maybe we would respond. But we haven't taken that strategy yet."

Like many charged with online reputation management, Stewart says she's learning as she goes; it's a new practice and involves a lot of trial and error. But those who've been at it for awhile say there's no time like the present to figure out a strategy, start monitoring, and take positive steps to boosting the institution's online reputation.

"I go to conferences, and it always amazes me," says Mantella. "I ask how many people have been to various sites, and I see maybe half of the hands go up. I ask how many people are tracking regularly, and maybe two hands go up. We as an industry haven't yet got our heads around this." ◪

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